DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 456 924 PS 029 767

AUTHOR	Newman, Rita, Ed.; Hearron, Patricia, Ed.
TITLE	Focus on Pre-K & K (Ages 4-6): A Quarterly Newsletter for the Education Community, 2000-2001.
INSTITUTION	Association for Childhood Education International, Olney, MD.
PUB DATE	2001-00-00
NOTE	34p.; Published quarterly.
AVAILABLE FROM	Association for Childhood Education International, 17904 Georgia Avenue, Suite 215, Olney, MD 20832.
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - Serials (022)
JOURNAL CIT	Focus on Pre-K & K; v13 n1-4 Fall 2000-Sum 2001
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	Brain; Class Activities; *Curriculum Enrichment; Disabilities; Early Childhood Education; *Family School Relationship; Field Trips; *Kindergarten; Learning Activities; Learning Centers (Classroom); Newsletters; Parent Teacher Conferences; *Preschool Curriculum; Science Education; Special Needs Students
IDENTIFIERS	*Celebrations; *Transitional Activities

ABSTRACT

These four quarterly newsletter issues address various topics of interest to teachers of young children. Each issue includes articles on a specific theme, along with regular columns. The Fall 2000 issue focuses on imbuing celebrations with meaning. One article describes how one Japanese preschool adapts concepts from the Waldorf education approach to create meaningful birthday rituals. A second article contains a reading list of appropriate books for young children with ideas for celebrations. The topic of the Winter 2000 issue is communication between schools and families, with one article detailing strategies for written communication with families of young children and a second article describing a "walking report card" devised as an alternative to traditional end-of-year conferences at a preschool. The Spring 2001 issue features articles that could help enrich learning activities for young children. One article describes how preservice teachers created science discovery centers for preschoolers as part of a methods class. A second article describes a pictorial contract system used with young children during center time to facilitate quality decisions. The Summer 2001 issue highlights transition between programs and presents one article addressing end-of-year celebrations and another providing a guide to planning field trips that include children with disabilities. A third article discusses implications of brain function and structure for childhood education. (KB)

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Focus on Pre-K and K (Ages 4-6): A Quarterly Newsletter for the Education Community, 2000-2001.

edited by Rita Newman and Patricia Hearron

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Fall 2000 • Vol. 13, No. 1

Focus On Pre-K & K

ages 4-6

A Quarterly Newsletter for the Education Community

From the Editors

Welcome back to the start of a new school year that will be filled with the joys and challenges that accompany involvement with young children and their families. We begin this year of *Focus on Pre-K & K* with an article that emphasizes the "I" in ACEI. Michelle Morrone describes how one Japanese preschool adapts concepts from an educational philosophy with German roots to create birthday rituals that are "both a celebration of individuality and a reaffirmation of group identity and belonging." You will enjoy reading about a birthday ceremony that begins in the morning and lasts all day. Parents, teachers, the principal, and the students all share in creating a special event.

Michelle's article reminded us that all our celebrations with children are powerful expressions of cultural values—whether or not we are

continued on page 2 . . .

More Than Cake and Candles: Birthday Celebrations With Meaning

Michelle Henault Morrone
Nagoya University of Foreign Studies

In Japan, a well-known proverb, "The nail that sticks out must be pounded in," aptly conveys one of the most widely recognized rules of Japanese social regulation. The awareness that one must avoid drawing attention to one's individuality or else face harsh social consequences is a common feature of everyday Japanese life. Nevertheless, the child's birthday party, a custom that—contrary to the sentiment of the proverb—deliberately raises up an individual for a day of special treatment has been adopted in Japan, and is now common practice among families with young children.

Although birthday parties have become popular in the Japanese home, a child's birthday still rarely holds a special place in the school environment. Despite this general acceptance that birthday parties and school do not mix, birthday celebrations have been brought into some Japanese preschools in a systematic and ritualized way.

The incorporation of a foreign practice into a traditional institutional framework in Japan is hardly uncommon. To a large extent, modern Japan can be defined by precisely this sort of integration of external and internal elements. The example of birthday parties in a preschool setting provides a glimpse of this process. An examination of this phenomenon offers insight into not only trends in Japanese preschool education, but also the way Japanese society absorbs foreign elements into a solid core of traditional values.

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Yamasato Hoikuen

Roughly speaking, *yochien* are nursery schools and *hoikuen* are child care centers. Within these broad categories, a great deal of variation exists. Some preschools are very educational in their orientation, and some are devoted entirely to free play.

Consequently, the preschool world in Japan, although subject to government guidelines, is remarkably diverse when compared to higher levels. Essentially, each preschool is able to adopt its own approach to preschool education, and a variety of different philosophies flourish. Yamasato Hoikuen, the focus of this study, is devoted to the Waldorf educational philosophy, which has its roots in German culture.

Junko Goto, the principal of Yamasato Hoikuen, admired Waldorf's child-centered approach to education and its emphasis on individual experience and expression. A very spiritual person, Ms. Goto also appreciated the emphasis that Waldorf philosophy puts on the child's development in the natural world. She wanted to create a similar world for Japanese children, a place where they could develop and play without being subject to the pressures of the modern world around them. Creating the right environment was the first step.

Yamasato Hoikuen's school environment mimics nature's patterns. Schoolrooms, for example, have curved ceilings and walls, rather than square, unnatural shapes. Toys are handmade (mostly by teachers) of natural fibers and materials. Special attention is given to seasonal rituals and events throughout the year, with numerous attendant activiti providing a constant sense of anticipation and celebration among the children, teachers, and parents.

At Yamasato Hoikuen, adherence to Waldorf pedagogy does not mean traditional aspects of Japanese preschool education are ignored. According to Kenta Goto, the vice principal of the school (and son of the principal), the school has not attempted to copy the German model precisely. Rather, they have adapted it to give it a comfortable Japanese feel. Mr. Goto believes that while it is important for children to respect all cultures, it is particularly important to help children gain respect and admiration for the stories, rituals, and practices of the culture in which they live. Through group rituals like the birthday celebration at Yamasato Hoikuen, the child comes to better understand how he, as an individual, fits into the larger social world and what expectations await him in that world.

At Yamasato Hoikuen, parents

. . . continued from page 1

conscious of it. Her Japanese preschool imported a western custom, but did it in a thoughtful way that respected traditional Japanese values. She inspired us to seek out more resources that will help you create celebrations that are meaningful as well as culturally respectful. This issue includes an annotated list of books on celebrations that we invite you to explore. Please share with us how you celebrate birthdays and special occasions with the children in your school.

We celebrate when we hear from you! Thank you for your personal responses to past issues. And thanks to those of you who have submitted articles or ideas for future issues. E-mail has proven especially convenient for this purpose—this entire issue was produced and edited electronically. We welcome all your comments and manuscripts as we, too, look forward to the coming year.

—R.N. & P.H.

are expected to support the school's belief in the value of *meruhen no sekai*, or fantasy world. Until about the age of 7, a child is thought to develop within a child's world, a world of fantasy and imagination quite distinct from the artificial, mechanical world of modern adult society. In connection with this fantasy world, one ritual that receives great attention is the birthday celebration. Parents are expected to take part in the celebration. For certain birthdays, they will even spend the entire day with the child at school.

The Birthday Celebration

While Kenta Goto studied Waldorf education for three years in Germany, he brings his "own interpretations and thinking to the method in order to fit it into a Japanese context." Mr. Goto believes that the birthday celebration ritual informs the child of his place in society, while at the same time strengthening his growing sense of "ego." He uses the western term "ego," because, as he explained, "the concept cannot be translated directly into Japanese; the closest translation would be something like *jibun jishin*, or 'me, myself among others.' "

Despite Mr. Goto's use of the western term, the "me among others" idea is a more accurate way to describe the focus of the birthday celebration at Yamasato Hoikuen. The child enjoys being herself, but that individuality is celebrated in such a way that everyone is a participant. The attention lavished on each child on her birthday is both a celebration of individuality and a reaffirmation of group identity and belonging.

The birthday ceremony at Yamasato Hoikuen begins during morning salutations and continues all day. Before a morning prayer (the Waldorf influence extends to a quasi-Christian religious orientation), the teacher announces the student's birthday and plays a music box. Afterwards, the children line up and sing a special birthday song:

"Congratulations on your birthday; it's a wonderful day for a child. Let us all give our gifts to her."

Special birthday candles are lit for the first time. (The candle lighting will be repeated later.) A song played on a wooden flute calms the children and helps prepare them for the prayer. After the prayer, the birthday candles are extinguished and birthday decorations brought out. Special headdresses are prepared. The birthday child wears a golden crown made of paper with a yellow-gold veil. Three other children, all 5-year-olds, are appointed to be the wearers of the "star crown," the "moon crown," and the "sun crown." Being from the oldest group of children, the *nencho*, they have certain responsibilities during the ceremony. With the exception of the birthday child, they have the most active roles in the ceremony: They hoist the birthday child into the air, and they show the smaller children where to stand and what to do.

Unlike most preschools in Japan, Yamasato Hoikuen does not separate classes by age; three age groups occupy each class. Within the class, however, different responsibilities and privileges are accorded by age. The younger children are encouraged to look up to the older ones, and, in return, the older children are expected to take responsibility for watching over the smaller ones. The birthday ceremony takes place within this age-based hierarchy, and duties are assigned to the children based on their age group. As Mr. Goto explained to me, "Each child develops some notion of the importance of the event as well as a respect for the individual within the natural hierarchies of life. Unless the importance of the individual is sometimes emphasized, *ijime* (bullying) too easily becomes a natural outcome of hierarchies among Japanese children. It is always important to maintain a balance between the importance of the individual and the importance of the individual's place in the group."

As the ceremony begins, the children encircle the birthday child, the "king" or "queen" for the day, who sits on a chair made to resemble a throne. Children the same age as the birthday child are seated nearest to her or him. A table draped with red cloth displays a piece of driftwood, meant to represent a magical land or mountain, upon which stands a hand-knitted fairy. Around the fairy are small animals from the fairy kingdom. Pine cone trees, mirror ponds, and other decorations create a miniature nature scene. The fairy puppet, manipulated by a teacher, lights the candles and greets the birthday child. Cake

and sweets prepared by the parent are exhibited for all the class to see. Finally, a flower arrangement and gifts from the class are placed on the table.

The birthday child sits at the middle of the table in front of the gifts. The parent, invariably the mother, also sits at the table to one side of the child. After the birthday song and the greeting by the fairy, the teacher tells a story of how a message came down to the mother from the stars above that she was going to have a baby and that this baby would be very special. The teacher modifies the story for each birthday child in a way that reflects that child's personality and unique qualities. The birthday child then extinguishes another candle, and the teacher leads the children in chanting:

"Let us give her a ride in the carriage of the stars. Let's make her a carriage in the sky."

The children join hands and the 5-year-old crown-wearers encircle the child and form the birthday carriage. With the birthday child in the center, the encircling children walk around the room until all parts of the room have been reached. The birthday child is in this manner "transported through the heavens." Some children shout *Omedeto*! (Congratulations!), and the "carriage" returns the child to his throne. The oldest children, holding tightly onto the chair's legs, lift the throne and child into the air three times.

Next, the teacher has the children line up, with the birthday child at the head of the line. "Now, the birthday child will share her special day with you," the teacher explains. "Put out your hands and she will anoint you with magic oil." The children remain seated, excitedly waiting their turn for the "magic oil." "Can you feel her happiness as she does it? Are her hands warm on yours?" The birthday child then takes the balm (scented oil) and rubs it on the palms of each child's hands, tickling the children into giggles.

The parent eats lunch with the birthday child at the special table. After lunch, the room is rearranged and the children choose to pass their time in a variety of ways. Some draw with crayons or play make-believe, while others play with handmade wooden toys or go outside to the playground. Many of the children ask the parent to join in the activities with them. Later, at snack time, around 3:00 p.m., the birthday party resumes. Two or three children bring the class gifts to the birthday child.

Three- and 4-year-olds usually receive a number of origami in a special handmade paper basket. All birthday children receive a collection of pictures painted by their classmates and bound into book form. The oldest children receive a special gift from their teachers: a candle holder with the birthday child's name engraved upon it and a candle inside, all handmade by the teachers themselves.

Birthday children of all ages receive a special plaque depicting a fairy tale scene (hand-painted by a teacher) with the child's photo affixed to the front and a special message about the child on the reverse. The message, poetically written, usually includes specific references to the child's personality. Here is one for a 5-year-old:

Cute little Mari, you talk so well it makes us teachers happy. You always play make-believe in a loud voice, running around, laughing and sometimes crying; you look like you enjoy it so much. Soon, your mother will have a baby and you will again become bigger; certainly... you will become a very kind big sister, won't you! We are looking forward to this, too. From this day on, please keep healthy, happy and light-hearted as you grow.

Finally, the traditional birthday song is sung, and the birthday candles are lit and blown out again. The cake is cut (homemade cakes are preferred) and the parent helps to distribute it among the children and teachers. The birthday child is expected to thank everyone individually and then personally deliver a piece of the cake to the principal. During the day, because the birthday has been announced in the daily logbook for all to see, teachers and parents who encounter the parent and child offer their congratulations. It is a day shared by all.

Conclusion

Socialization, character development, and an understanding of the importance of rituals and hierarchy are traditionally the main goals of Japanese preschool. Although it is commonly believed that a non-academic environment best fosters these values, schools like Yamasato Hoikuen go a step further in their adoption of a

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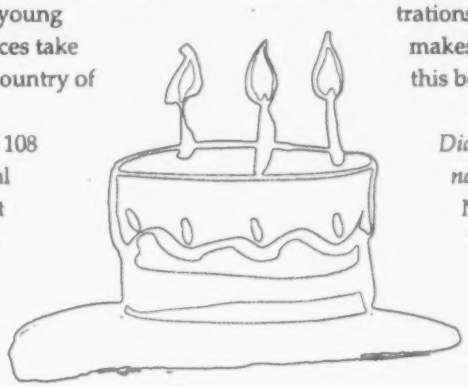
An Invitation To Celebrate:
Expand Your Ideas Through Literature

Rita Newman

What celebrations do you plan with your students? Do your families share special occasions with their child, classmates, and the teachers? This issue's focus might inspire you to explore how birthdays could be celebrated in school—and how other events might be cause for celebration.

In *I'm in Charge of Celebrations* (New York: Scribner, 1986), Byrd Baylor will open your eyes and inspire you to celebrate what is around you. She shares her private celebrations in an unforgettable book to be read aloud to young children. Her special experiences take place in the southwest desert country of the United States.



Last year, Baylor gave herself 108 celebrations—besides the official holidays. As she describes Dust Devil Day, which happened on March 11th, you will feel the dry air, and the extraordinary pictures of Peter Parnall will let you count the dancing dust devils. The Time of the Falling Stars, celebrated in August, will certainly inspire you to think about what you, too, could be celebrating with your children!

The reading list below is a brief introduction to appropriate books for young children that are filled with ideas for celebrations, either planned or spur-of-the-moment. Celebrations of life, country, other cultures, and each other will become meaningful to children and the adults that guide them. Here is your invitation from *Focus on Pre-K & K* to celebrate all your days with children!

- Bailey, D. (1992). *Dancing*. Austin, TX: Steck Vaughn. Celebrations through dance are beautifully depicted through photographs and brief descriptions. (A dance program with 4-year-olds is surely something to celebrate!)
- Bailey, D., & Sprade, A. (1991). *France*. (From the series, *Where We Live*). Austin, TX: Steck Vaughn. Colorful photographs and clear text illustrate people around the world celebrating through festivals, parades, music, and dance.
- Cerozco, J-L. (1994). *De colores and other Latin American folk songs for children*. New York: Dutton Children's Books. The author has selected, arranged, and translated a wealth of songs to celebrate special occasions and everyday times. He includes simple musical arrangements for guitar, piano, and voice. The lyrics are in both Spanish and English, and are accompanied by vivid illustrations. (A companion audiotape makes a valuable supplement to this book.)
- Coteau, O. S. (1995). *Did you hear the wind sing your name? An Oneida song of spring*. New York: Walker and Company. This unique and beautiful book is a celebration of life's rhythms—the return of morning from night, and the circle of the seasons.
- Guthrie, W. (1998). *This land is your land*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company. Rich illustrations by Kathy Jacobsen add to the powerful message of this song written by Woody Guthrie; the book contains a tribute by Pete Seeger.
- Hoyt-Goldsmith, D. (1993). *Celebrating Kwanzaa*. New York: Holiday House. This outstanding book describes the holiday celebrated by African American families in unique ways based on the families' own values and traditions. Thirteen-year-old Andria's story is illustrated with colorful photographs. Information about the historical origins of this holiday is included, along with a glossary.
- Kindersley, A. (1997). *Celebrations*. New York: Dorling Kindersley. Children around the world are shown celebrating special occasions with their families. A calendar at the end of the

book lists festivals and holidays for each season.

◦ Krauss, R. (1949). *The happy day.* New York: Harper and Row. Various animals, beautifully illustrated, celebrate the awakening of spring.

◦ Krull, K. (1994). *Maria Molina and the days of the dead.* New York: Macmillan. Maria enjoys family relationships and learns she can carry on family traditions through celebrations.

◦ Livingston, M. C. (Ed.). (1985). *Celebrations.* New York: Holiday House. This classic includes poems for 16 holidays, including one's own birthday.

◦ Pingry, P. A. (2000). *The story of America's birthday.* Nashville, TN: Ideal Publications. This board book is a beginning point for a simple discussion of Independence Day, using few words and realistic illustrations.

◦ Strickland, D. S., & Strickland, M. R. (1994). *Families: Poems celebrating the African American experience.* Honesdale, PA: Boyds Mills. This is a rich collection of poems and fine illustrations about family relationships, customs, and celebrations.

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culturally foreign pedagogy like Waldorf. At first, the Waldorf emphasis on individuality and self-worth seems at odds with the traditional Japanese emphasis on group identity and self-effacement. Yet, the Yamasato birthday celebration illustrates how a Japanese school successfully borrowed a seemingly alien practice and adapted it to serve traditional ends. For in addition to being a celebration of individuality, the birthday ritual at Yamasato Hoikuen is also a process of initiation into a larger, and still very traditional, social world.

Many of the children at Yamasato Hoikuen experience several birthdays while there, starting in some cases with their first birthday and extending all the way to their sixth. From their own birthday experiences and from participating in the birthdays of their classmates, they come to know the rituals with a deep and intimate familiarity. By watching the children during the ceremonies, however, it is obvious that this familiarity does nothing to diminish the magic of the occasion. If anything, it seems only to deepen the children's enchantment.

Despite their giggles and seeming embarrassment, the birthday children, particularly as they get older, seem to regard the ceremonies with great seriousness. Being singled out in this way does not appear, however, to give them an inflated sense of self-importance. The ritual's emphasis on the birthday child's connection to those participating in the ceremony may actually serve to play down the importance of the child independent of others. Although the birthday child is able to stand out for a day, her individuality celebrated by all, the real point of the birthday ceremony at Yamasato Hoikuen may be to show the child that her importance as an individual is directly linked to her relation to those around her—the parents, teachers, and children who make this magic possible.

Resources for Further Study

Bachnik, J. (1994). *Situated meaning: Inside and outside in Japanese self, society, and language.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Benedict, R. (1946). *The chrysanthemum and the sword.* Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Co.

Boocock, S. (1989). Controlled diversity: An overview of the Japanese preschool system. *Journal of Japanese Studies, 15*(1), 41-67.

Caudill, W., & Weinstein, H. (1969). Maternal care and infant behavior in Japan and America. *Psychiatry, 32*(1), 12-43.

Conroy, M., Hess, R., Azuma, H., & Kashiwagi, K. (1980). Maternal strategies for regulating children's behavior. *Journal of Cross-cultural Psychology, 11*(1), 153-172.

Kondo, D. (1990). *Crafting selves: Power, gender, and discourses of identity in a Japanese workplace.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lebra, T. (1992). In N. R. Rosenberger (Ed.), *The Japanese sense of self.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

LeVine, R., & White, M. (Eds.). (1986). *Human conditions: The cultural basis of educational developments.* New York: Routledge & Kegan, Paul.

Peak, L. (1991). *Learning to go to school in Japan.* Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Tobin, T., Wu, D., & Davidson, D. (1989). *Preschool in three cultures.* New Haven, CT: University of Yale Press.

White, M. (1988). *The Japanese overseas: Can they come home again?* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

education systems in Finland and New Zealand

This year we had a wonderful summer—lots of sun, not many mosquitoes, and warm long days. Summertime is holiday time in Finland. After the long school year, teachers do need a holiday to get energy for the next school year. Finnish teachers who are working in compulsory schools have 10 weeks of summer holiday, but preschool teachers and teachers in child care have only 6 weeks of paid holiday.

Our teachers have done a very good job. Finnish children are among the best readers in the world. For Finnish preschool teachers, this year will be extremely challenging. We are going to implement a kindergarten renewal, in which kindergarten will become part of the school system. Our parents expect that all of the children's environments, including preschool, child care, and school, will be of high quality, and emphasize play and social interaction with peers and teachers. Parents do not emphasize academic skills for children too early.

The strategy for implementing a kindergarten renewal involves listening to the parents and children themselves very carefully. This is also the strategy for Finnish quality management in early childhood education. I suppose that our teachers will have plenty of questions during this coming kindergarten renewal process. ACEI's conferences in Toronto and Manila next year could be very beneficial in offering contacts with other teachers who have been involved with developing kindergarten programs.

I hope that you have had a relaxing summer holiday and that you enjoy being back at work.

—Eeva Hujala, Vice President
Representing Infancy/Early Childhood

Call for Manuscripts

The readership of *Focus on Pre-K & K* is encouraged to submit ideas and manuscripts related to the education and development of children ages 4 to 6. Editorial assistance is available if needed. If you have any materials or suggestions to be considered for publication, please send them to:

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Focus on Pre-K & K
Fall 2000, Vol. 13, No. 1

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ACEI

Winter 2000 • Vol. 13, No. 2

Focus On Pre-K & K

ages 4-6

A Quarterly Newsletter for the Education Community

From the Editors

Every effective teacher of young children recognizes the value of communication with families as a means of establishing links between home and school. The authors in this issue of *Focus on Pre-K & K* demonstrate that such communication can take a variety of formats, from written notes and letters to planned classroom visits and conferences.

Julia M. Lee and Ouida McDougal discuss strategies for written communication with families of young children. They remind us that Education Goals 2000 places the responsibility on teachers and schools to increase and improve partnerships with parents. They also provide examples of specific types of written communication, followed by guidelines and recommendations.

Genan T. Anderson describes a "walking report card" that she and a colleague devised as an alternative to traditional end-of-year conferences at her preschool. She takes readers through the planning steps and

continued on page 2 . . .

A "Walking" Report Card in Preschool

Genan T. Anderson
Utah Valley State College

Sharing children's progress with parents is an important element of early childhood programs. In seeking ways to showcase the growth of children throughout the school year, we have tried a variety of techniques. A logical extension of our project-culminating activities was an end-of-the-year performance report card, or "walking" report card.

A walking report card provides the opportunity for a parent (both parents, a grandparent, uncle, aunt, or other important adult) to walk with the child through a series of centers where the adult can observe the child's performance in various activities. Having seen such an assessment used in early childhood programs in public schools, we decided to test the response of our preschool children and parents to this form of assessment in our two classrooms for 4- and 5-year-olds.

Preparing for Parents

We invited the parents to bring their child for either the first or second hour of the 2 1/2 hour program. Three weeks before our activity, one teacher simply notified the parents of their child's assigned time; the other teacher gave the parents a choice of times by inviting them to sign up during drop-off or pick-up for either slot. Both systems worked well in splitting the groups equally and meeting the parents' time parameters.

With two classrooms in our program, we chose to prepare our materials independently because we wanted to see two different perspectives and have the performance assessments reflect the individual characteristics of the two programs. (While both classrooms follow the same basic philosophy, there are differences

in personal teaching styles. In addition, a different community of children gives each classroom a separate life of its own.)

Two Ways of Reaching a Common Goal

The approach taken by one teacher was: "The more information you give parents the better." The second teacher took the route of simplicity. The simpler approach proved a little more realistic. In the first room, we tried to stay with our philosophy of child choice by providing at least two possible alternatives to demonstrate the assessed skill in each center. Some of the children only wanted to choose the activity they did first. Since there was not enough time to do all 16 activities in one hour, both parents and children felt rushed. In addition, the detailed handout provided more information than the parents could handle while they were trying to focus on their child's performance. The extra materials may be valuable, however, for later review and synthesis.

The second classroom limited the offerings to six tasks and then pulled the group together at the end for the children to share some favorite music. Fewer activities contributed to a more relaxed atmosphere. Although few sets of parents and children were "finished" when they were asked to make the transition to the music time, the formal ending nevertheless provided a nice closure.

Interaction of the Parents and Preschool Child

Many parents came either alone or as couples to focus solely on their preschool child for the hour. Others brought one or two, even as many as four, of the child's siblings. One parent who brought two younger children expressed her appreciation at being able to include them because she felt they gained something from the experience. We had to decide what was of greatest importance: the preschool children's opportunity for one-on-one time with their parents, or the overflow benefits to the entire family. It was a hard question that we never answered definitively.

Parent Evaluation of the Performance Report Card

Parents' assessment of the activity varied according to their personal expectations, participation, and perceptions. Some common threads from the parents' responses were that the activity allowed them to see their child "in action," and illuminated the child's interests for them. Others saw it as a good review, while some found it less than helpful because their child seemed too shy to participate while they were watching. The most frequently identified favorite part of the activity was seeing their children's excitement, and watching them hold the power to decide, demonstrate, and teach.

Many parents who answered our questionnaire stated that they missed the evaluation from, and interaction with, the teacher that typically occurred at a traditional parent conference. While half our respondents expressed a desire for the performance report card to become a part of our

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follows up with a frank assessment of the value of the experience, as perceived by teachers and parents.

Take this opportunity to think about how you might communicate with families more effectively in your setting. Are you considerate of language differences that involve both written and oral communication? Do you strive to reach all parents, including those who may have struggled with their education, but are reaching for higher goals for their children? Realizing the diversity of your families will help you to plan for the best and most appropriate ways to have positive and effective communication with them.

We appreciate your responses and recommendations this past year and look forward to continuing to communicate with you! Your professional ideas and suggestions are welcome.

—R.N. & P.H.

program, most were very clear that they did not want it to replace parent-teacher conferences. While parents varied in their assessment of the amount of information they gleaned from this evaluation compared to the traditional conference, several noted that they learned different things from each format. One helpful suggestion from a parent was to use this evaluation format for their parent workshop at mid-semester, and continue with the traditional conference at the end of the year.

Summary Evaluation

We had mixed feelings about the walking report card. We were gratified that every child had at least one parent participate. On the other hand, we were disappointed to find that the sheer amount of print overwhelmed some parents. With so much of ourselves invested in making the materials instructive and helpful, we hoped the parents would enthusiastically embrace them. As we watched the children confidently "show their stuff," we hoped the parents would see the same growth and progress we had observed. Without a comparative benchmark, however, few actually did. Such a comparison could be found in the portfolio that included anecdotal assessments, which they took home a few days later. Unfortunately, without a teacher to pinpoint demonstrated growth, much of it may have been overlooked.

While no form of assessment provides a complete picture of a child, we believe that adding the walking report card to portfolio and anecdotal assessments and twice-yearly parent-teacher conferences helped us share an accurate assessment of each child with their parents. Replacing this last parent-teacher conference offered the added benefit of relieving some end-of-the-year stress for the head teacher. Because it worked well with our workload, we hoped it would be just as great for the parents. Unfortunately, many parents did not believe the benefits were an adequate exchange for a one-on-one conference with their child's teacher.

How We Would Do It Differently

Will we do it again? Definitely, but with some modifications. The reading and math assessments could be done as activities sent home in a bag with all the materials and instructions. They could go home on different weeks and be returned with the parent's evaluation of the child and the activity. We would not try to have the children interact with one another in a dramatic play situation with a parent present. Most children were not able to initiate or focus on peer interaction when the parent was nearby. We would include four assessment areas (large motor, block construction with labeling, creative/science, and observational drawing) and gather the children for a brief music time at the end. With about 45 minutes for those activities, we would let the children then eat a snack and read with an assistant teacher; meanwhile, we would split the parents into small groups in an adjacent room to meet with an assistant or head teacher to complete their evaluation form and have an opportunity to ask questions and gain feedback.

Given 20 children morning and afternoon, we would plan to run one session in the morning, one in the afternoon, and another in the evening to give parents several choices. Also, we would send home full instructions and directions for the activity a week in advance for parents to consider and use as preparation. There seems to be no ideal blueprint here, but our commitment to parent and family education prompts us to keep trying.

Related Reading

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Note: The handouts and instructions that we used are on our Web site at http://fhss.byu.edu/mfhd/preschool/PreschoolNew.html for any who would like to look at them. Two separate sets of materials—one under Dorie and the other under Genan—represent our independent approaches.

Guidelines for Writing Notes to Families of Young Children

Julia M. Lee
Ouida McDougal
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Ms. West met her son Tom at the door and, noticing that he seemed anxious to get past her, called out to him, "Tom, what's wrong? Why are you in such a hurry?" Tom did not answer; instead, he reached into a worn pocket of his jeans, pulled out a crumpled piece of paper, and handed it to her. Ms. West asked, "Tom, is this a note from your teacher?" Tom replied in a teary voice, "But Mom, I didn't do it. He shoved me first." Ms. West put her hand under Tom's chin and lifted his face upward so that he had to look directly at her. She said, "Tom, we have not had a note from your teacher before this time. Now go clean your face while Mom reads the note, okay?"

Ms. West slowly unfolded the crumpled paper Tom had brought home. She stared in amazement at the jagged edges of the paper, as if the teacher had carelessly torn it from a note pad, and then torn it in half. She thought to herself, "I guess we aren't important enough." As she began to read the message written by the teacher, she paused when she saw that the note did not address her by her name. It simply read, "Dear Parent." Ms. West had thought that Ms. Green, Tom's teacher, knew her name. Again, she thought to herself, "I guess I'm not important enough."

To Ms. West's further surprise, in addition to describing the shoving incident that Tom had mentioned, the teacher also cataloged other misbehaviors: he shoved John . . . , he didn't pay attention . . . , he wouldn't stay in his place during circle time . . . , he disrupted her classroom . . ., etc. . .

According to Goal 8 of the "Goals 2000" initiative, schools should facilitate family participation in promoting children's social, emotional, and academic growth. Teachers and schools are responsible for forging and supporting partnerships with families that result in shared educational decision-making. In order to achieve this, the use of effective communication strategies with families is one of the most important responsibilities of teachers of young children. Teachers communicate during meetings, informally at school, at home visits, through newsletters, and frequently through written communication techniques such as notes, letters, journals, and E-mail (Carter, 1999).

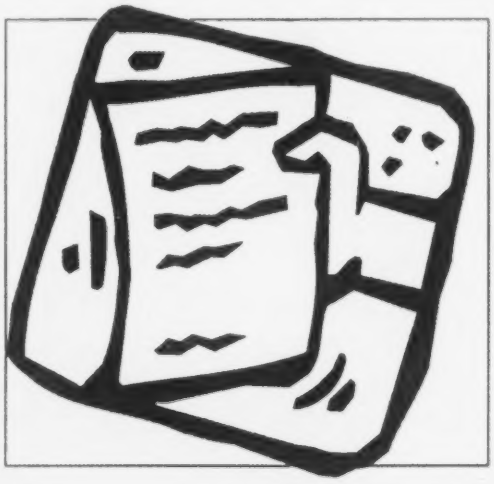
All teachers of young children in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten programs send letters or notes to their students' caretakers in order to maintain effective communication (Kaiser & Rasminsky, 1999; Kines, 1993). While more and more teachers are using technological methods (e.g., E-mail, Web bulletin boards) to communicate with families, it must be recognized that not all families have access to such technology (Carter, 1999). Also, some families with access to E-mail report that it is more cumbersome to open an E-mail message or check a Web site than to simply read a letter or note.

Regardless of the avenue, teachers must communicate with families of children for a variety of purposes: to maintain lines of communication, to receive updates on children's progress and development, to share classroom activities, and to describe concerns that may arise (Kines, 1993). To achieve these goals, it is important to use effective communication skills. Several key guidelines can be helpful when writing to families, either electronically or on paper. Although these guidelines are straightforward and some seem obvious, time constraints or other reasons may result in written communications that do not always reflect the recommended practices.

General Guidelines for Notes

Make sure that all notes, E-mail messages, and

letters are personalized. Address the caretaker by name and title. If you are on a first-name basis, use that name. Do not write "Dear Parent." This sends the message that you do not know the child well enough to know his/her parent's or caretaker's name. Make sure to use the correct name, as children live in a variety of family structures. Children in foster families, children who have stepparents, and those in extended family arrangements often will not share the last name of their parent or guardian. Avoid the use of forms on which "To the parent(s) of _____" is printed. Again, this depersonalizes your communication with the family members (Gestwicki, 2000). In addition to addressing the caretaker by name and title, make sure that all references to the child include his/her name as well. An informal analysis of sample letters written by preservice and practicing teachers in early childhood and special education yielded several instances of the use of "your child," "your daughter," or "your son."



In discussing classroom activities, special programs, or other issues, make sure that your written communications build a sense of community and shared ownership with the children and their families. Use of phrases such as "in my classroom" inhibit feelings of belonging and ownership; discussing the fun that "we are having in our classroom" builds that sense of community. The classroom is not solely the teacher's; rather, it should be considered a shared community of learning by children, their families, teachers, volunteers, etc.

While titles are used to address written communication, titles should not be used when signing a note or letter. Teachers should (either through E-mail or in written paper correspondence) end the note by writing their first and last names. Again, if the relationship with the guardian is on a first-name basis, sign only that.

Finally, consider the extent of professionalism that your written communication reflects (Anonymous, 1999). As a general rule, notes should be neatly written, typed (or word processed), or printed on whole sheets of paper (not torn pieces). Prior to pressing the "send" button on the E-mail message, mailing a letter, or sending a note home with a child, make sure that you edit and proofread for spelling, grammar, and typing errors.

Guidelines for Specific Instances

In addition to these general guidelines, the following specific recommendations can help you improve communications with families about specific problems students may be having in the areas of social or cognitive skill development. For families to be fully participating in decision making regarding their children's education, they must be informed if and when these issues arise. When the information is provided in writing, however, it is important to address some key elements.

First of all, consider if the information can be presented in writing clearly and succinctly (Anonymous, 1999). At times, a face-to-face meeting may be necessary to share some types of information. This decision will be determined by the situation, the child, and the family. If the information can be shared in writing, make sure that the written communication follows the general guidelines described above. In addition, protect the confidentiality of the child and family. At a minimum, place the note or letter in a sealed envelope. Be aware that E-mail is not always confidential and perhaps should not be used to deliver sensitive information to families.

Make sure that a balance of information is sent home with children. Do not reserve communication for problems. Ensure that the initial notes, E-mail messages, or letters reflect positive messages

so that a good relationship can be built. When behavioral or developmental issues arise, discuss the child's progress and strengths first so that the family can readily see that strengths, as well as concerns, have been identified (Anonymous, 1999).

After the positive information is provided, identify the concern in specific but concise terms. Try to describe only one behavioral or developmental issue at a time; avoid sending a "laundry list" of issues. The intent of sending a written communication regarding behavioral issues is to inform and solicit assistance in understanding why the behavior may be occurring and to develop alternatives. Collaborative problem solving builds partnerships with parents and necessitates two-way communication techniques (Gestwicki, 2000).

When delivering sensitive information to families that addresses social or cognitive issues, recognize that parents may see criticism of their children as a reflection on their parenting skills (Newman, 1999). Also remember that a child at home may be quite different than the child the teacher sees in a classroom of 15 to 20 other children. Make sure that you present yourself as an ally, someone who acknowledges the family's feelings and who is willing to be supportive of the family (Anonymous, 1999).

Summary

The following scenario depicts a more respectful and effective communication than the teacher's informal note described at the start of this article. Communications such as this demonstrate the teacher's recognition of the value of communication with families in helping children develop cognitive and social skills. Such recognition gives the family and the child a sense of well-being (Barbour & Barbour, 1997), and facilitates a positive school/home relationship.

Ms. West met Tom at the door and asked how his day had been. Tom excitedly told his mom about visiting the fire station and being allowed to sit in the fire truck. He then reached into a worn pocket of his jeans, removed an envelope, and handed it to her. Ms. West said, "Tom, is this a note from your teacher?" Tom replied, "Yes. I think it's about how much I like circle time. And it may be about pushing John after he shoved me. We worked it out, though." Ms. West said to Tom, "That's great about circle time. And remember, we don't hurt our friends."

Ms. West opened the envelope Tom had brought home. The outside of the sealed envelope, and the letter itself, were addressed to "Ms. West." Pulling out the neatly printed note, Ms. West began to read the message. The note began with a description of how well Tom was doing in kindergarten this year. Ms. Green especially praised his involvement during circle activities. She wrote, "Tom is so involved during our opening circle and eagerly participates in all activities." Ms. Green did describe the shoving incident, stating that "the children worked together and jointly developed a plan for how they would respond the next time. We usually do that in our classroom." She was pleased with the responses of both Tom and the other child in working together, and wanted the parents of both children to be informed of the incident.

In closing, Ms. Green thanked Ms. West for her time, repeated that Tom was doing well in the class activities, and invited her to come and join in the activities any time. She also said that if Ms. West had any questions she should feel free to call. Ms. West put the letter back into the envelope and thought again how lucky Tom was to have Ms. Green as a teacher.

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ACEI's 2001 Annual International Conference and Exhibition

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The following is a sample of some of the Pre-K and K sessions that have been accepted for presentation at the 2001 Annual Conference. Look for details as to the dates and times of each session in upcoming conference publications.

A Tale of Two Kindergartens, A Century Apart

A comparison of two kindergarten programs, 100 years apart, serves as a case study for examining larger issues in early childhood education, including: kindergarten curriculum, teacher preparation, and professional recognition for early childhood teachers.

Kindezi: A Pre-Froebel and Post-Internet, Africentric Perspective on Early Childhood Education

The art of raising competent children is encompassed in the African Kindezian philosophy, which emphasizes the value of children, elders, and community.

Play Their Way: From Froebel's Curriculum Kits to Interest Bags for Young Children

Participants will discover meaningful ways to help students successfully turn theory into practice by developing intriguing materials to use during play with young children and/or their families. While viewing examples of interest bags, documentation panels, and photographic images, conferees will discuss the relevance of linking appropriate past and present educational practices.

But I Can't Sing a Note! Music and Movement for Infants-Preschoolers

Research-based curriculum enriches learning, listening skills, and child development. Learn methods, activities, and the confidence to implement a rich musical environment of Traditional Folk Music.

Reaching Out Through The Internet: Videoconferencing Kindergarten to Kindergarten

Learn how to use videoconferencing to explore and expand learning. Also learn about suggested projects, establishing partnerships, necessary equipment, and maybe participate in a LIVE videoconference.

Kindergarten in Transition: What's Alike? What's Different? From Froebel to Kate Douglas Wiggin to Present Day Preschool and Kindergarten

This presentation will bring together historical, philosophical, and applied perspectives on the work of Froebel; one example of how that work was considered in early American kindergarten teacher training and work, and how those efforts can be seen in today's preschools and kindergartens.

Time-Out Is Out: Developing Appropriate Alternatives for Helping Challenging Young Children Develop Self-Control

This dynamic and interactive workshop will focus on providing participants with knowledge of effective and appropriate intervention strategies to assist children in developing self-control. Specifically, the following activities will be emphasized: 1) identifying variables that may lead to behavioral problems in children, 2) identifying specific classroom prevention, and 3) developing intervention strategies that assist children in developing self-control.

Nurturing Readiness in Kindergarten: A Holistic Model for Teaching and Learning Through Project Work

A learning environment at the 4- to 6-year level must address the fundamental needs of child development through authentic experiences that challenge a child's potential, ignite a child's spirit, and shape a child's personality.

Ready To Learn in the Inner-City Kindergarten: An Interagency Collaborative Effort

This session will examine the difficulties many inner-city children face when entering kindergarten, identify specific ways to help these children learn in school, and describe a model of interagency collaboration that is currently working in a major urban environment to identify and assist these children.

Call for Manuscripts

The readership of *Focus on Pre-K & K* is encouraged to submit ideas and manuscripts related to the education and development of children ages 4 to 6. Editorial assistance is available if needed. If you have any materials or suggestions to be considered for publication, please send them to:

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Focus on Pre-K & K
Winter 2000, Vol. 13, No. 2

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ACEI

Spring 2001 • Vol. 13, No. 3

Focus On Pre-K & K

ages 4-6

A Quarterly Newsletter for the Education Community

From the Editors

This issue of *Focus on Pre-K & K* features two articles that could help enrich learning activities for young children. Read on to discover creative, practical, and challenging ways to teach students—and adults!

Deanna Radeloff describes the experiences of aspiring teachers in a methods class as they create science discovery centers for preschool children. Sea shells, rocks, sandpaper, containers, magnets, and other items are carefully organized into Science Discovery Centers that encourage children to explore. "Sharing common experiences about familiar natural objects in an informal setting stimulates oral language use and builds science vocabulary," says the author. I am sure you will agree that such Science Discovery Centers are an invaluable way to promote learning and growth for both children and adults.

Bobbi Warash asks, "How often do you give young children enough information to make quality decisions about their involvement in the activities we provide?" Warash describes a pictorial contract system that she uses each day with young children during center time. She presents vivid examples, collected over nine years, and emphasizes the importance of using visual references to support verbal cues

continued on page 2 . . .

Science Discovery Centers: Stimulating Young Children's Minds

Deanna J. Radeloff,
Barry University

What do feathers, a penny, jar lids, a green rubber frog, pipe cleaners, sea shells, rocks and magnets have in common? Each may be used to create science discovery centers for preschool-age children. Aspiring teachers in one science methods class organized and implemented five such centers for children in school settings. They recorded both the responses of the children and what they learned about teaching science.

The Discovery Centers

Texture

The feather was one of several materials placed at a texture discovery center. Other materials included a sponge, popsicle sticks, crumpled foil, three grades of sand paper, waxed paper, cotton, a rubber band, a plastic ruler, a wooden ruler, gloves, felt, cloth, a scouring pad, a blunt screw, Velcro, paper towels, and a pom pom. In groups of 10, children were asked to examine and describe these materials. One child picked up the scouring pad and said, "This is rough." One child said that the sandpaper "feels crunchy, like cereal," while another noted that "the sponge is hard. It needs to get soft." Several children began to categorize the materials. One said that "the ruler, popsicle sticks, and the waxed paper are smooth." Another put the gloves on her hands and remarked, "The gloves, cotton ball, and sponge are the same." A third announced, "I am putting all the rough things over here."

The adult learner who had created the center found that children seemed eager to explore the materials by looking, smelling, and feeling. The teacher did not need to interfere, but simply encouraged the children with comments such as, "Hmm, I wonder how the cotton feels compared to the pom pom?" or "The

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sandpaper is rough, while the waxed paper feels...," and pausing to let the child respond.

Rolls/Slides

A penny, along with a small glue bottle, a glue stick, a cylindrical tin can, a cylinder block, a chalkboard eraser, a rectangular Lego, a paper clip, and a double "D" battery constituted a rolls/slides center. The teacher sat with four children and explained and demonstrated that each object could be tested to see if it rolled or slid. When an object rolled, the children exclaimed at how fast it rolled. In observing other objects they said, "Aah, this one doesn't go fast because it slides." The children concluded that the glue stick, the cylindrical can, the cylinder block, the pencil, and the battery all rolled "because they all look like circles." They noted that the chalkboard eraser, paper clip, rectangular Lego, and penny all slid, but they thought that the small glue bottle could both slide and roll. One girl observed that the plastic garbage bag helped the objects roll and slide a little faster.

The adult learner concluded that children best learn science concepts when given materials that they can manipulate. The children themselves devised the procedure of testing a few objects and then predicting whether the remaining objects would roll, slide, or do both. Their faces revealed their excitement as they checked out their predictions. They seemed genuinely thrilled when they placed all the items in the appropriate column on a chart that the teacher used as an assessment activity.

Lids and Containers

In spite of the adult learner's initial misgivings, the lids and containers center also was enticing for preschoolers. Lids and matching containers were placed on a tray in the classroom science center. Children sorted them by size and color, and twisted lids onto matching containers. One child smelled them, announcing, "This smells like bubbles. This smells like pepper." Another suggested putting holes in the lids so they could make necklaces. The aspiring teacher learned that "you never really know until you try something whether it will be a success."

Green

The green rubber frog became part of the green discovery center, along with a pickle, two markers, a crayon, a Lego piece, construction paper, a pear, a piece of pretend lettuce, and a pencil. While any color could become a focus for a discovery center, green is desirable because it can represent so many living and non-living things. The teacher asked the three children in this center to create groups of how the materials were alike or different. The children responded immediately: "They are all green." When the teacher said, "Look more closely," the children sorted the objects into groups of light and dark shades of green, then into food versus non-food items. The last thing they did was to count the objects. For some reason, they were pleased that the dark green objects outnumbered the light green ones, five to three.

The adult learner noted that the children enjoyed working with so many green objects at once—all of which were easily accessible in the classroom. She said she was "surprised to learn that preschool age children do notice the different shades of colors, and [that they] have a shade preference."

Bend/Doesn't Bend

The pipe cleaner was used along with yarn, a feather, a paper bag, an airplane stencil, construction paper, a popsicle stick, a hammer, a ruler, paintbrush bristles, a flute, a marker, and a book to create a "bend/doesn't bend" discovery center. The teacher asked four children to select three objects and test whether or not they would bend. Following the teacher's demonstration, the children began to flex the objects back and forth, exclaiming, "Yes, it bends!" or "No, it doesn't bend." Next, the

... continued from page 1

when working with children. According to Warash, the contract system helps children learn decision-making skills, gives teachers a basis for evaluating their instructional activities, and forges stronger connections between home and school as parents receive a daily account of their children's activities.

This issue of *Focus on Pre-K & K*, like others before it, emphasizes the importance of the teacher's role. Enjoy these next months heralding a new season! And please keep your questions, manuscripts, and comments coming!

—R.N. and P. H.

children and the teacher classified the objects into groups of those that bend and those that do not bend, and wrote the results on a dry-erase chart. One of the children commented that the objects that did bend seemed to be softer and easier to move, while those that did not bend were hard and did not move as much. As the children explored, they talked eagerly among themselves about their findings. They were intensely involved in the activity, taking the initiative to get materials they wanted to test.

Sea Shells

Because the children all live near a beach, they were able to bring in a wide variety of shells for the sea shells discovery center. One child put the big conch shell to his ears and said, "I can hear the ocean." Another said, "Look at all the shells. Where did they come from?" "The shells come from the beach in the sand," said one, while another thought they came "from under the water." Two children thought animals lived in the shells, and one fantasized that "these holes have mermaids in them." Several commented on the physical properties of the shells, noting that they were "big," "heavy," or "rough." One child who was learning English said, very quietly, "I hear something like water." Sharing these common experiences about familiar natural objects in an informal setting stimulates oral language use and builds science vocabulary.

Rocks

Similar types of discovery occurred in the rock center. The children collected rocks of various shapes and sizes from the schoolyard, and the teacher provided a sorting tray full of polished rocks for comparison. After listening to a story about rocks, the children were allowed to explore the rocks, commenting, "This rock has glitter on it," "Mine is a glass rock," or "My rock don't have any diamond." They made hypotheses about what they saw: "Look here, worms live in this rock," and "No plants grow in there." They drew comparisons: "My rock is red like the dirt inside." "Some of the rocks are new and some are old." "They are not the same size—one is big, one is medium, and one is little." The adult learner noted that the children's first reaction often was to hit the rocks together or to pound them on something. She found that exploring with rocks stimulated curiosity ("Why does the rock have so many holes?") while it encouraged classification and seriation. The children also associated what they learned from the story with what they saw as they examined the rocks.

Magnets

The magnet center was stocked with a horseshoe magnet and various objects that the children explored while the teacher commented and asked questions to extend their thinking. Although one child thought it was "magic" that the magnet picked up things, others looked for more "scientific" explanations: "I wonder why the magnet won't pick up this [plastic]?" "Magnets don't pick up plastic. Magnets pick up magnets." One child concluded that "things that are shiny and look like silver stick to the magnet," while another countered that "foil paper and the paper clip are the same color but the magnet will not pick up the foil paper because it is too silver." A third child refined this theory by noting that "the magnet picked up the clothes pin because of the silver on the side." Afterward, the children tried to identify magnets on the playground.

The Value of Discovery Centers

The adult learners agreed that their classrooms would include discovery centers. They recognized that teachers need two things in order to support the children's explorations: They must have the background knowledge about science to respond appropriately to children's spontaneous comments, and the skill to know what sorts of questions or comments to interject at what points in the process. One aspiring teacher said, "I have learned that when children are experimenting with things, they forget the teacher and communicate with their peers as if they [were] teaching each other." Another exclaimed, "I had a great experience doing these discovery centers. The children were very eager to participate. Even at their young age they paid close attention and were extremely well-behaved. I had feared that the activities would be too messy, but to my surprise, the children did a wonderful job!" If children are given the materials and resources that meet their interests, they will uncover new things, which, in turn, facilitates learning. The science discovery centers provided a valuable venue for helping children become good thinkers.

Is It Contract Day?

Bobbi Gibson Warash, Professor,
Child Development and Family Studies Director,
West Virginia University Child Development Laboratory

We live in a democratic society that empowers citizens to make decisions for themselves. Therefore, it is important to prepare children to make good decisions. Dewey felt that the classroom should be a miniature democracy and that children should be engaged in projects that help them understand their role in their community (Dewey, 1916). His concept of learning by doing is reflected in the philosophical basis for many curricula for young children. Dewey felt that children should learn about life and the skills necessary for living, including the ability to make good choices.

When we present children with choices and respect their decisions, we strengthen their independence (Hendrick, 1992). In many preschool classrooms, children can choose their activities, which empowers them to make decisions and build skills. But how often do we give young children enough information to make quality decisions about their involvement in the activities we provide? Isn't it true that we often tell children to go play, or to explore a center, without instructing them about their choices? In order to be more effective in helping children develop life skills, we must think critically about the options that interest them.

To construct this autonomy, teachers need to set the proper stage. They need to identify and use the appropriate words and mechanisms to give children the correct message. Most preschool teachers encourage children to make decisions about free play activities, such as choosing whether to paint and what colors to use, picking a puzzle, using blocks, etc. For most preschoolers, many activities interest them. To make informed decisions, however, children need to be aware of their choices prior to making a commitment. It is good if children view their preschool as a place where they can make decisions about what they want to do, and it is even better if they know the options at the beginning of each day. From the opportunity to make choices comes the opportunity to learn responsibility. Responsibility and the ability to make choices—important skills that are needed throughout life—are connected (Kelman, 1990).

The West Virginia University Child Development Laboratory (Nursery School) has devised a pictorial contract system that young children use each day when choosing center time activities. The contracts give children a visual reference to events, in addition to the teacher's verbal cues. When the child completes an activity, he/she stamps a mark beside the picture on the contract. The teacher or student teacher will often write a message on the contract about the child's progress at a center.

For nine weeks, we collected a data on this project to see if contracts would be an effective device for organizing part of the preschool day. We examined the number of centers children were choosing to do and the number they actually completed; we also examined the centers they were choosing and surveyed parents for their input on the contract system.

How the Contract System Began

Prior to using contracts in 1991, the teacher at the Nursery School used a more traditional approach to planning the day. The teacher planned four small-group activities and/or learning centers. The first hour of the 2 1/2-hour preschool session was designated as free play. Free play choices included blocks, housekeeping, library, sand table, small manipulative area, computers, and two special activities that varied each day. As the children arrived at preschool, the teacher greeted each one and told them about the free play options. This system of informing children individually worked quite well because children arrived at different times, sometimes varying by as much as 20 minutes. The children could begin their school day by choosing a center activity without being interrupted for a group meeting or circle time. This part of the day worked quite well. It was the second part of the day that concerned us.

For designated "center time," the teacher planned four small-group activities that were either teacher-directed or child-directed. The teacher-

directed activities ranged from reading a book to engaging in a math or science project. The other activities were planned by the teacher, but were self-directed by the child. For example, a special play dough and various cookie cutters and rolling pins might be set up as a center. This system was used as an organizational structure to allow a group of children to move from one activity to another fairly efficiently while taking advantage of the activities developed by the teacher. Children rotated from one center to another as a group.

It did not take us long to learn that this system was too teacher-directed, with too little input from the children. The teacher was the one deciding when children should move from one center to another. Furthermore, they had to move, even if some had not finished an activity. In addition to addressing this problem, we wanted to give children an opportunity to review their choices of activities for center time in order to learn decision-making skills. Therefore, we revised center time so that the children decide which centers to attend and how long to engage in each activity. Contracts, along with pictures representing each center activity, were developed. We anticipated that this would give children an opportunity to complete an activity and move on to another activity when they were ready.

In 1991, when the first data was collected, 15 children (9 boys and 6 girls) attended the afternoon class of the Nursery School. The children ranged in age from 4 years, 0 months to 5 years, 1 month, and they attended the Nursery School five days a week for 2 1/2 hours a day. The new contract system was introduced and demonstrated at circle time, which followed free play. The teacher reviewed all the pictorial icons on the contract, and then the children circled icons on the contract with a marker to indicate the centers they wanted to attend. They carried their contracts with them and found the center by matching the contract icon with a larger version of the same icon at the center. If the teacher had a center that could only accommodate four or five children at one time, she would put up a "full" sign and children would return later.

Initially, we used contracts only on Mondays and Wednesdays, increasing the number of centers to seven on Monday and eight on Wednesday. On the other three days, we used our original system of four teacher-planned centers. Examples of the Monday and Wednesday centers included math, puppets, scrapbooks, art, fine motor, and library. Each of these centers had a stamp and a stamp pad so that children could stamp the icons for the centers they completed on their contract. Teachers wrote a sentence about the children's participation and progress on their contracts. It was not long before we had children asking enthusiastically, "Is it contract day?"

Results

With the contract system, children decided which center to participate in and how long to stay. With

Children's Books To Complement Science Discovery Centers

Rita Newman

Baylor, B. (1974). *Everybody needs a rock.* New York: Scribner's.
Blackstone, S. (1998). *Bear in a square.* New York: Barefoot Books.
Cole, J., & Dugen, B. (1999). *The magic school bus explores the senses.* New York: Scholastic.
Ehlert, L. (1990). *Feathers for lunch.* New York: Harcourt Brace.
Ehlert, L. (1990). *Fish eyes—a book you can count on.* New York: Harcourt Brace.
Frasier, D. (1990). *Out of the ocean.* New York: Harcourt Brace.
Goble, P. (1998). *Iktoni and the boulder.* New York: Orchard Books.
Jeusesse, G., & Cohort, E. (1990). *The seashore.* New York: Scholastic.
Lionni, L. (1959). *Little blue and little yellow.* New York: HarperCollins.
Lionni, L. (1975). *A color of his own.* New York: Dragonfly Books.
Parsons, A. (1990). *Amazing birds.* New York: Knopf.
Ricuitti, E., & Carruthers, M. W. (1998). *A first field guide of rocks and minerals.* New York: Scholastic.
Ringston, A. (1991). *Diggers and dump trucks.* New York: Little and Simon.
Ringston, A. (1998). *Truck trouble.* New York: DK Publishers.
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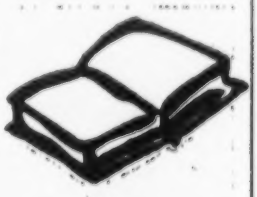
Zolotow, C. (1992). *The seashore book.* New York: HarperCollins.



more options available on the contract days, we wondered whether children would complete more centers each day or if, because they could decide on their length of stay, they would complete fewer centers. During the first few weeks after contracts were introduced the children were very conservative in the number of centers they circled on their contracts. As time passed, however, they circled more centers than they actually completed. We collected data for nine weeks, during which time they completed 1,071 centers on the two contract days, compared to 560 centers on the two days using the traditional method of four teacher-directed activities. We noticed that children were doing more and, at the same time, were more involved in the activities they were choosing. Children liked the options of having more centers and staying at a center until they completed it. They flowed from center to center individually and not as a group.

It was interesting to observe the different strategies that children used to rotate to a different center. For example, several children preferred to do all the centers and carefully managed their time so they could accomplish this goal. They were always very proud of their "full" contract. Other children preferred to get involved in fewer centers, but their interest remained very strong in those they did choose. Children could regulate how much time they spent at a center, moving on when ready. The contracts accommodated various learning styles and personalities. Even children who usually played with special buddies during free play went their separate ways at center time.

The types of centers that children participated in during this initial phase were also interesting. Children tended to do more centers that involved math manipulative, language experience, and active play. The least popular centers where ones where a book was read aloud. Our hypothesis was that these middle-class children have numerous opportunities to be read to at home and school, and therefore prefer more social activities that are not usually available at home.

Conclusion

We have found that offering children a daily pictorial contract gives them information to make more purposeful decisions about which center to visit. Being able to analyze the contract at circle time allows children the opportunity to think about their choices before they commit to an activity. Initially, we were concerned that the children might avoid certain centers, but this seems to be the exception, rather than the rule.

The contract system is very versatile and can work with different center schedules and different ages. We seem to make adjustments each year depending on the composition of the class. For example, one class of 20 children liked to chart how many centers each child in the class completed each day. That year, we celebrated when the class reached 1,000 completed centers. Calculating the number of centers the class completed motivated children who tended to station themselves at only one center. We have learned to be flexible with the use of contracts and adjust them to the needs of the class.

The contracts have additional benefits. They serve as a way for children to record their own choices and their progress, and as an opportunity to keep a record of their day's events. The contracts also help to serve as an evaluation of the instructional activities, revealing which activities children are attending and where we need to put more effort in order to appeal to the children. Contracts also serve as a home-school connection, providing parents with a daily account of what their children did at school, establishing a point of reference to spark conversations, and creating a record for parent conferences. Over the years, we have surveyed parents about the use of contracts. All of the parents commented that the contracts were an added benefit of the preschool program. They made comments such as, "My child and I talk more about the school day" and "My child reads his contract to us and it makes him feel important." We found parents to be very enthusiastic about receiving daily information on their children's activities, and they especially like the notes that were specific to their children's progress.

Since the inception of contracts nine years ago, we have refined the system several times. We now use contracts on a daily basis and have learned to be flexible according to the needs of the class. We have extended center time so that the children are involved with centers for an hour. We have included snacks as a part of center time, which again serves the individual needs of each child. A

continued on page 8 . . .

A Glimpse Into a Child's Mind

Stories about children and the things they say offer glimpses into the unique ways they perceive the world. Children's conversations can help us remember what is truly important as we race through our busy lives. Consequently, anecdotes about what children say can be invaluable, as well as entertaining. Through the determined efforts of Jim Hoot, Judit Tamas, Leah Adams, and Patricia Kostell, you will have a chance to own a collection of such anecdotes. As a joint project with the World Organization for Early Childhood Education (OMEP), the Association for Childhood Education International has published *From the Minds of the World's Children*. Jim, Judit, Leah, and Patricia spent several years soliciting and recording stories from around the world.

The editors are seeking additional stories to be included in Volume Two, and maybe Volumes Three, Four, etc. . . . Please see the Call for Stories/Quotations below.

If you are interested in purchasing *From the Minds of the World's Children*, please call the ACEI Ordering Department at 1-800-423-3563, or 301-570-2111. We hope you enjoy reading *From the Minds of the World's Children*, and please consider submitting your own stories.

FROM THE MINDS OF THE WORLD'S CHILDREN CALL FOR STORIES/QUOTATIONS

1) Submit your children's stories/quotations using this form and a separate sheet(s) of paper. You may share as many stories/quotations as you like. Conclude EACH story with your name, city, state/province, and country. (These will be published with each story.) Please don't forget to include the approximate age of the children in the stories. Children's first names may be changed.
2) Complete the CERTIFICATION OF ORIGINALITY AGREEMENT (below). One Agreement is fine for all quotes/stories submitted by one person.
3) You may submit your STORIES and the ORIGINALITY AGREEMENT at the conference. You may also E-mail, fax, or mail them to:

Jim Hoot
SUNY Buffalo
525 Baldy Hall
Buffalo, NY 14260

Phone: 716-741-2597
Fax: 716-645-3161
E-mail: jhoot@acsu.buffalo.edu

CERTIFICATION OF ORIGINALITY AGREEMENT

I certify that the submitted stories/quotations/anecdotes have not been previously published in another source. I hereby give the Editors and/or ACEI all the publications rights for the submissions. I understand that all proceeds from this volume will be used by ACEI and OMEP to promote international development.

Your Printed Name: _____
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City, ZIP, State/Province: _____ Country: _____
Tel: _____ Fax: _____ E-mail: _____

STORIES/QUOTATION/ANECDOTE (submit as many as you like)

Submitted by _____ Country _____
Child's Approximate Age: _____

. . . *continued from page 6*

table is reserved for snacks and drinks so that children can take breaks whenever they want. In addition, the contract system reinforces the whole language approach as children learn to match the picture on the contract to the picture at the station, first reading the pictures and eventually reading the words printed under the pictures. Children also observe the teacher printing the child's dictated statement on the contract or the teacher printing a comment about the child's involvement in a center.

We were initially worried that 4-year-olds would constantly lose their contracts, but we have found this to be the case only rarely. The children act responsibly for their contracts and when they are finished with activities, they place their contracts in their lockers to take home. Contracts have become an important part of our preschool program. They are an organizational tool that benefits children, teachers, and parents.

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Focus on Pre-K & K
Spring 2001, Vol. 13, No. 3

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Summer 2001 • Vol. 13, No. 4

Focus On Pre-K & K

ages 4-6

A Quarterly Newsletter for the Education Community

From the Editors

The school year may be drawing to a close for the children in your programs, but evaluation of the past year and planning for the coming year goes on! This issue of *Focus on Pre-K & K* highlights this transition time by presenting one article addressing end-of-year celebrations and a second that will help you plan ahead for more successful field trips next year.

Becky Oekerman describes several examples of kindergarten graduation exercises, and presents strong arguments for replacing these ceremonies with more developmentally appropriate rituals. She says, "The end of the school year is always a good time to reflect on and celebrate what has been accomplished."

Sylvia S. Martin and Randy L. Seevers provide a guide to planning field trips that include children with disabilities. As many have already discovered, making programs work better for children with disabilities generally leads to a better experience for all children. Regardless of the population you serve, your field trips are likely to be more enjoyable and worthwhile for everyone if you adopt the strategies suggested by these authors.

This issue marks a transition for us as well, the end of our term as editors of *Focus on Pre-K & K*. We hope these

continued on page 6 . . .

Kindergarten Graduations

Rebecca Oekerman
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Area Coordinator, Early Childhood Education
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"Graduation ceremony for kindergartners . . . for kindergartners?" This was the question asked by Zoe MacPherson's dad last spring in the comic strip "Baby Blues." The occasion that marked Zoe's completion of her first year of school included a speech by a member of the school board, each student walking across stage to receive a diploma, and Zoe attempting to toss her cap into the air, midshipman style. Comic strips frequently mirror events in society and this one is no exception. As the end of each school year approaches, many early childhood educators are faced with the question: To graduate or not to graduate?

The word "graduation" denotes the idea of completion, a task accomplished, or an academic degree earned. Graduates are thought to be individuals who are prepared to move into the larger world, leaving the security of educational institutions. When applied to children who are 4, 5, or 6 years old, this term seems oddly out of place. We think of young children as just beginning their quest, ready to take their first steps in the arena of formal education. Why, then, every spring, do preschool and kindergarten graduation ceremonies abound?

Reasons for Holding Graduation

One reason that has been given for holding these ceremonies is that it offers an "opportunity for families to spend time together" (Beccue, 1990). It is true that today's families are busy. Many children not only are enrolled in some type of out-of-the-home

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care, but also are involved in after-school activities ranging from soccer to Suzuki violin lessons. While it may be true that a graduation ceremony could be a way for families to spend time together, parents often have more than one child and must make choices as to which child's activities to attend. They may, in fact, end up splitting the responsibility, with one parent attending the graduation and the other going to a sibling's ball game or ballet recital.

A second reason offered for holding a graduation is that it meets "the expectations and desires of many parents" (Beccue, 1990). In "Baby Blues," Zoe's mother, unlike the father, is enthusiastic about their daughter's upcoming graduation, excitedly telling her husband, "It's a really big deal." Just a brief Internet search confirms what a "big deal" graduation can be. One can find a plethora of poems, certificates, and school newsletters related to kindergarten and preschool graduations. But the question must be asked: Is graduation an appropriate activity in which to involve young children?

For early childhood programs in the habit of holding graduation ceremonies, it may be a difficult decision to rethink the idea of holding a graduation ceremony. Nevertheless, researchers and educators have offered many reasons why it may not be in the best interests of young children to require their participation in activities that put them on display before an audience of adults.

Reasons To Reconsider Graduation

One reason for reconsidering the decision to hold graduation is the amount of time spent practicing for such an event (Beccue, 1990; Miles, 1991; Woods, 1989). Often, children are required to spend hours rehearsing a program that is expected to come off "picture perfect" (Schmidt, 1995). During rehearsals, children are asked to sit quietly for long periods of time and attend to teachers' directions or the actions of other children as they perform their parts. Having little or nothing to do, these normally active young children may become frustrated and engage in mild to severe anti-social behavior. This, in turn, may make teachers frustrated and result in a situation that is difficult and inappropriate for all involved.

Activities where children are expected to perform before audiences also may create tense situations for children. Young children are often shy in new situations and may be frightened when confronted with a bank of cameras and camcorders held by people they do not know. This tension, combined with the stress engendered by numerous rehearsals, may result in children experiencing headaches, stomachaches, or simply refusing to participate in the actual ceremony (Miles, 1991).

As can be expected in dealing with young children, performances do not always come off perfectly and what actually occurs may be seen as comical or "cute" by the adults in the audience. Although not intending to be unkind, adults may laugh at the children's actions and thereby confuse the participants ("Why are they laughing?"). Sometimes, the children feel humiliated. Woods (1989) described adults in these situations as failing "to treat children with courtesy and respect . . . (and) rob[bing] children of their dignity as people" (p. 20).

Schmidt (1995) found that school ceremonies, including graduation, were particularly difficult for language minority children and their families. Preparing for and participating in such activities, the purpose of which they did not understand, confused the children and resulted in classroom tensions. The children joined in the experiences only reluctantly, and the situation actually exacerbated already existing socialization problems. The children's families also had difficulty because they did not fully comprehend the significance of the activity and "could not relate (it) to their own culture's . . . celebrations" (p. 26).

Another factor that should be evaluated is the cost involved with the ceremony. Internet sites abound with sales pitches for items such as "KinderHoods" and show pictures of young children perfectly attired in graduation gowns and caps, complete with tassel. The Web site for one kindergarten program advised parents that the cost of the complete graduation outfit would be $17.50 per child. This, of course, does not include the costs for printing the invitations and programs, buying the diplomas, decorating the area where the ceremony is held, video-

recording the event, or holding a reception.

Finally, there is the suggestion that graduation ceremonies will become meaningless to children if they participate in too many (Miles, 1991). One Internet site related a conversation between a mother and grandmother regarding an upcoming kindergarten graduation. The child's mother explained the event as "closure." The grandmother replied, "Closure from what? She's got 12 to 16 more years of school ahead." During those 12 to 16 more years, how many more such ceremonies will this child attend? Perhaps as many as five.

Making the Decision

Erikson (1950) described the period of early childhood as one in which children develop either a sense of initiative or a sense of guilt. Guiding children to a sense of initiative is not difficult, but it does require that adults accept the children's strengths as well as their limitations (Elkind, 1989). When children are placed in situations where they are expected to conform to adult expectations and then find they cannot, the development of initiative may be retarded. In his book *Miseducation*, Elkind (1989) suggested that adults examine their motives when making decisions about children's activities. A determination must be made as to whether the child's welfare is the motivating factor for participation, or if another goal is driving the decision. In commenting on a graduation ceremony that his school was about to hold, one principal, quoted in an Internet article, stated, "It's really a passing for my teachers. It's a nice way for my teachers to end their time with their kids."

Making a decision to re-evaluate a tradition is never easy. Yes, there may be valid reasons for doing things as they have always been done; however, even wise decisions can withstand timely reviews. But if the decision is made to begin a new tradition in place of graduation, what can be done instead?

What To Do Instead

If, in fact, the rationale for holding a graduation ceremony was to provide families with the opportunity to be together, there are many other ways an early childhood program can promote family closeness. Why not invite families to participate in school activities all year long? Hold a family picnic, a carnival, a parent-child activity night, an art exhibit, or an end-of-the-year party. Invite parents to come to school and read to children or ask them to share a family tradition or recipe. For parents who cannot visit, ask them to record a book on tape to be played during large-group time, or send home a literacy bag with activities that the family can do together.

If the reason graduation was done was to fulfill the expectations of parents, then it becomes the obligation of advocates for young children to help administrators, parents, and community members understand what types of activities are appropriate for preschool and kindergarten age children and what activities are not.

Conclusion

The end of the school year is always a good time to reflect on and celebrate what has been accomplished. In preschool or kindergarten it marks the beginning of what we all hope will culminate in a 17- or 18-year-old donning a cap and gown, equipped with the knowledge and skill that will allow him or her to move on to the next stage in life. It is our job as teachers of young children to see that this start is the best one we can provide.

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Field Trip Considerations for the Early Childhood Inclusion Class

Sylvia S. Martin and Randy L. Seevers,
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Vignette: Mrs. Jeffrey, a kindergarten teacher in a full inclusion elementary school, had spent weeks planning and preparing for the class field trip to the children's museum. Ever since a teacher from another school had told her how beneficial and enjoyable her class's trip to the museum had been, Mrs. Jeffrey had anxiously anticipated her first community trip with her class. She had planned carefully to eliminate any possible barriers to the field trip. The cost to the school district was well under budget. All permission slips were signed and returned by the deadline. Transportation was arranged and travel to the museum was on a bus that was accessible to wheelchairs—no separate bus for her students with disabilities. This field trip was to be inclusive from beginning to end. From information the museum had sent in the mail and from phone conversations with museum education staff, she had been able to link the field trip to the kindergarten curriculum by introducing related material in class. For her six inclusion students she had matched IEP objectives to curriculum objectives, had addressed accessibility issues with the museum School Groups Coordinator, and had more than the necessary number of parent volunteers to assist with the students. So why did it all fall apart?

Ever since a teacher from another school had told her how beneficial and enjoyable her class's trip to the museum had been, Mrs. Jeffrey had anxiously anticipated her first community trip with her class. So why did it all fall apart?

Field trips for young children have been used successfully to serve a number of purposes. Descriptors used to describe educational uses of field trips include educational stimulation, concrete experiences, experiential learning, interdisciplinary approaches, science and social studies activities, student participation, environmental education, outdoor education, student motivation, citizenship education, community resource education, learning strategies, student-centered curriculum, second language instruction, and active learning. Articles are readily available for teachers on how to plan and prepare for field trips; suggested teaching techniques and study units; tips on transportation, safety, liability, suitability, and cost; as well as how to maximize field experiences and have successful field trips. To encourage the use of museum facilities for school field trips, children's museums often have programs and exhibits developed to correspond with educational objectives. In addition, they may offer a series of lesson plans and activities developed for use during the museum visit, or may provide educational staff or docents trained to facilitate groups of young visitors. Descriptions of museum programs and services for young children are usually available at the museum itself, the museum Web site, or through the mail in response to phone requests.

To enhance the learning process for young children, children's museums encourage active engagement with exhibits. However, for some young children with sensorimotor or processing disabilities, interactions may be limited without adaptations or the assistance of technology. Although some information on museum accessibility or services for persons with disabilities is available through Web sites or brochures, the information provided most often addresses architectural accessibility issues. Specific information on the accessibility of exhibits, programs, and

activities for young children with learning or sensorimotor disabilities appears to be lacking in museum information.

To ensure educational stimulation for all children, this discussion will present a guide for use in preparing for a successful inclusive field trip to a museum. Areas to be considered include preplanning issues, personnel considerations, and suggestions for evaluation of the social/behavioral and physical environments, as well as accessing exhibit directions and information.

I. Preplanning

A. Make a connection with the museum staff. Let the staff know when you and your class may be coming to the museum. Learn the names of the staff who will be guiding you and your class during the visit. By building a rapport with the staff, it will be easier to communicate over the coming weeks while you plan the field trip. Follow up with a letter detailing any reasonable accommodations you might expect from the museum.

B. See what the child sees. While visiting the museum, get down at a child's level and see what they see in each area of the museum that the class will visit. Is it interesting? Upon entering the museum, is there anything that will immediately attract the attention of a particular student? Are there attractive nuisances that could be safety issues, such as stairways, escalators, etc.?

C. Assess crowding issues. Obtain information from staff on how many groups of children will be at the museum during the same time as your class visit. What are the ages of the groups? Where will each group be? If there are too many groups of the same age visiting at the same time, the age-appropriate exhibit areas may become overcrowded while other areas are virtually empty. Crowding is also a safety issue in keeping track of students.

D. Consider noise levels. The noise level may affect the behavior of some young children, and not only those with disabilities. Many museums have high ceilings and long corridors that contribute to noise and echoing.

E. Determine a reasonable schedule of museum areas. Often, there is a standard museum "tour" of activities, exhibits, and programs. Obtain a schedule of museum areas your class will visit; how long they will stay in those areas; and if any activities, presentations, or discussions will take place in the area. You may decide to request more time in some areas and omit others. There is no rule that every area in the museum must be covered in one visit.

F. Consider time constraints. Will all children have time in the areas selected? Physically go through the schedule yourself so you have an idea of what is "coming next" for the class. This will assist in making the decision for the best day, sequence, and time for your class visit, and allow you to take advantage of optimal learning benefits.

II. Personnel Considerations

A. Although museum education staff will have some training, do not assume they are familiar with the particular needs of young children with disabilities.

B. Don't assume that parent volunteers know

To enhance the learning process in young children, children's museums encourage active engagement with exhibits. However, for some young children with sensorimotor or processing disabilities, interactions may be limited without adaptations or the assistance of technology.

how to effectively transition young children from one place to another. Teach the parent volunteers some transition methods you use, and decide whether adult monitoring will be by group or zoned area.

C. Pay attention to safety issues. Do museum personnel wear particular items of clothing so they are easily identified? Children need to be able to make contact with a "safe person" in case they are separated from the group. Before the trip, children should become familiar with the particular article of clothing used by museum officials, such as a smock or an apron or a hat. Ideally, you should borrow one before the trip so the students can role play in class who they would go to if they get lost or are frightened and cannot find a teacher or a parent. If this is not possible, then use photographs you take on your visit to familiarize the children with the safety clothing.

III. Social and Behavioral Environment

A. Set the tone or pace
B. Motivate the activity
C. Allow for quiet times/areas
D. Select groups
E. Assign peer partners
F. Decide on zone or group monitoring

IV. Physical Environment

A. Lighting considerations:
   1. Transparent rather than translucent or opaque
   2. Is it incandescent, fluorescent, spot, flood, etc.?
B. Flooring considerations:
   1. Barrier free for wheelchairs, canes, walkers, etc.
   2. Obstruction free (e.g., materials in dramatic play areas)
   3. Composition/ texture: open grating, carpet, tile, etc.
   4. Design/pattern: high or low contrast
C. Traffic flow considerations:
   1. Entrances and exits
   2. Pathways/walkways clearly marked, maneuverable
D. Proximity/accessibility of interactive exhibits: with wheelchair, walker, cane, etc.
E. Size and variability of exhibit switches: levers, buttons, pressure plates, etc.
F. Table play space: accessibility for wheelchairs, walkers, height
G. Sound and noise issues
   1. Availability of accessible listening devices
   2. Microphone systems
   3. Soundproofing, noise control, "soft areas"

V. Exhibit Communication Media

Consider the information in each exhibit:

A. Visual, auditory, physical access
B. Timing of exhibit response
C. Audible and clear directions
D. Contrast and glare of screen directions
E. Visual displays, accent lighting, shadows
F. Availability of assistive technology, such as video phones, TDD
G. Braille (although younger children would not know Braille, it should be available)

Field trips to museums should offer opportunities for all children in an inclusion class to engage in interactive learning. But often the success of the trip is dependent on the classroom teacher's preplanning. Use of this guide will assist in planning for the educational engagement of all children in the class.

. . . continued from page 1

past years have been as enlightening and rewarding for you as they have been for us. We would like to thank each of you who have responded with manuscripts and personal contact. All future correspondence we receive will be sent to the ACEI office for the next editor(s) to review.

Finally, we thank you for your dedication as professionals in the field of early childhood education. We appreciate all you do for young children and the impact you have on their families.

—R.N. and P.H.

Implications of Brain Function/Structure Knowledge for Childhood Education

It is no longer possible for educators to dismiss knowledge of neurobiological processes as outside their areas of expertise. Scientists are not the only ones who need to know how the neuronal network and its communication processes function, and to understand how the brain's modular structures and primary functions are integrated in complex interactions. Although much more must be learned before a direct relationship between specific areas of brain development and particular educational practice can be demonstrated, it is already clear that brain development results from the interaction of genetic potential and environmental experiences, that growth and elaboration of the neuronal network during the early years of life is critical to children's knowledge construction, and that complex interactions among the modular components of the brain influence the efficiency and nature of learning. Moreover, the brain's plasticity (i.e., its flexibility and adaptability, especially at early ages) creates multiple opportunities for diverse experiences to influence its development. In fact, current knowledge suggests that every curriculum and every educational act might be called "brain-based," because every experience has the potential for influencing brain development.

Educators who appreciate the complexity and interconnectedness of children's sensory/motor processing, emotion center monitoring, and higher order thinking can use that knowledge in planning curricula. In particular, their awareness of similarities and differences that exist among individual brains can help them to be sensitive to the needs of children whose brains may have experienced biological or environmental trauma and so require educational adaptations. Thus, both practicing educators and educators-in-training need to obtain a knowledge base in developmental neuroanatomy and neuropsychology if they are to be informed evaluators of brain research for educational practice.

Brain Development and Environmental Experiences: Brain Development From 3 to 8

The early part of this period continues a phase of rapid growth in the brain and thus also continues a period of environmental vulnerability, especially in relation to development of language and intellectual systems. A few studies have generated hypotheses about the relationship of brain activity to temperament and behavior in the 3 to 5 age period. For example, Fox et al. (1995, 1996) found indications that highly social children with right frontal EEG asymmetry were more likely to have externalizing problems than were social children with left frontal EEG asymmetry. Furthermore, shy children with increased right frontal EEG asymmetry showed more internalizing problems than did those with left frontal EEG asymmetry.

One type of development that occurs during this age period is advances in the speed and efficiency of memory and intellectual processes, such as problem solving. Scientists have used measures of electrical transmission within the brain (ERPs) to study processing speed. With older subjects, they compare individual's processing rates with their scores on intelligence tests. Some studies of children's processing have been done and their reaction and inspection times grow shorter and performance on cognitive tests grows faster as their age increases.

By the age of 6, individual brain differences may be relatively stable. More generally, the age period from 3 to 8 may involve more individualization of brain structures and functions as children interact with environmental experiences. Although there is debate over whether the brain's plasticity can later overcome a lack of growth-enhancing experiences at critical or sensitive time periods, by the end of this age period, opportunities for expansion of the synaptic system do appear to be more limited.

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The above is an excerpt of a forthcoming book from ACEI. Watch for announcements about the publication of Brain Research and Childhood Education: Implications for Educators *by Doris Bergen and Juliet Coscia.*

Call for Manuscripts

The readership of *Focus on Pre-K & K* is encouraged to submit ideas and manuscripts related to the education and development of children ages 4 to 6. Editorial assistance is available if needed. If you have any materials or suggestions to be considered for publication, please send them to:

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Focus on Pre-K & K
Summer 2001, Vol. 13, No. 4

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